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ABSTRACT

Nine strategies, supported by research, are recommended to develop a differentiated, effected reading program for gifted students. They are: (1) instruction in basic word attack skills should be kept to a minimum; (2) basal content may be too bland so more challenging materials should be available to young children who are labeled gifted; (3) gifted readers should be grouped together so they can feel safe in verbalizing their insights; possibly requiring groups composed of students from more than one grade level; (4) since gifted readers should be urged to read widely, their teachers need an extensive background in children's literature and cooperation from the school librarian; (5) gifted readers must learn to read critically; (6) creative reading should be encouraged in gifted readers; (7) vocabulary development is crucial to critical and creative reading; (8) the use of analogies should be studied, especially in classes for older gifted students; and (9) various developmental skills must not be overlooked since gifted readers may need help in increasing their reading rate and in learning reference skills. (RL)

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READING FOR THE GIFTED:
INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES BASED ON RESEARCH

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READING FOR THE GIFTED:

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Because of their superior ability, the gifted benefit more than any other group when exposed to appropriate reading instruction. Unfortunately, all too often their instruction has been boring and sterile. Students capable of mastering decoding skills with little or no effort are drilled and skilled with ditto sheets and workbook pages. This is partly because it has been considered "elitist" to provide for the needs of the gifted (Switzer and Nourse 1979). But that kind of thinking has diminished somewhat since Public Law 93-830 was passed in 1974 to encourage state programs for gifted and talented students (Correll 1978).

Identification and Characteristics

The trend today is away from the historical idea of gifted-

ness as merely the ability to obtain high scores on an intelligence test. Six general kinds of giftedness are recognized: (1) general intellectual ability, (2) specific academic aptitude, (3) creative or productive thinking, (4) leadership ability, (5) artistic and performing arts talent, and (6) psychomotor ability. In reading, our concern is with the intellectually and/or academically gifted who read at an advanced grade level with comprehension. This is generally from three to five percent of a school's population (Trezise 1978).

Certain behaviors are characteristic of gifted children. Typically they learn to read earlier and better than their peers. They develop a large vocabulary and use it with humor. They take little for granted, constantly asking "how?" and "why?" One task can hold their attention for long periods. Working alone does not bother them, and their interests are intense as well as diverse (Carmichael 1979).

Background

Gifted children tend to read before attending school. Such was the case with nearly half of the gifted youngsters in Terman's (1925) population of 1,500 gifted children. Also Price (1976) found that 27 out of 28 youngsters in a Palm Beach, Florida gifted class were said by their parents to be reading before entering first grade.

Upon entering school, the gifted child is generally advanced in the use and comprehension of words, is original in expressing his or her thoughts, and utilizes more complex sentence patterns. Strickland (1960) found that in comparison to other children of the same age, gifted youngsters speak in longer, more complex sentences and use more mature expressions. In an analysis of all forms of language used by a wide cross section of elementary school children, Loban (1963) noted that the highest correlation was between the results of an intelligence test and an oral vocabulary test. Nonetheless, gifted children need the same fundamental language tools as the others, but at different times and to a different degree.

When beginning reading instruction is not differentiated, gifted readers sometimes lose interest and do not perform as well as might be expected. Brzeinski, Harrison, and McKee (1966) discovered that pre-first grade readers only maintained their higher levels of achievement when the reading program was adjusted to take into account that they were already reading. Durkin (1966) also found that a group of early readers was less interested in first grade than non-early readers. Gifted readers need to work at their own levels, perhaps independently from the other members of the class. Unfortunately, most beginning reading programs are developed on the assumption that all children entering first grade are not reading, thus early readers are taught what they already

know.

Reaching the Teacher

The most important need of the gifted reader is for a superior teacher. Just creating a top reading group and then providing the usual kind of reading instruction is an inadequate response to the needs of superior students. In a study of 37 children from a small mid-western town, it was found that early readers who were placed in classrooms where the basal reader was used in the conventional manner did not progress as well as those put in classrooms where basals were used imaginatively by flexible teachers (Durkin 1974-1975). Obviously, the teacher rather than the materials or methods determines the quality of instruction.

Witty (1971) offers six general suggestions to teachers:

(1) facilitate rather than direct, (2) challenge rather than pressure, (3) be as concerned with the process of learning as with the product, (4) provide feedback rather than judgment, (5) supply alternate learning strategies, and (6) arrange the classroom climate so that it promotes self-esteem and offers safety for creative and cognitive risk-taking. But how can a teacher translate these suggestions into specific reading lessons and activities? Books on education for the gifted are of little help. Less than two percent of their contents deals with reading instruction (Switzer and Nourse 1979). The number of journal articles dealing specifically with reading for the superior student is limited also. However, a

common thread runs through the texts and journals: the development of critical reading and thinking skills should be the basic objective.

Program Adjustments for Gifted Readers

Certain strategies are recommended to develop a differentiated, effective reading program for gifted youngsters (Boothby 1980; Trezise 1977, 1978). First, instruction in basic word attack skills should be kept to a minimum. These children tend to learn in ways that are different from the average student. They are apt to learn to read in intuitive flashes, by cognitive leaps and bounds. For that reason, a closely sequenced program may be inappropriate.

Second, basal content may be too bland. More challenging materials are called for so that gifted readers can be guided in going beyond what happens in a story. They should be encouraged to deal with the significance of the story's events and to perceive their relationships to other books or stories read as well as to their own lives. These readers gravitate to the abstract, prefer complexity, learn through association, and enjoy answering questions from a moral and ethical point of view. Therefore, trade books should replace the basals.

Third, these readers should be grouped together with others of similar ability so that they can feel safe in verbalizing their insights. Such groups may be composed of more than one grade level, such as grades three to six. These cross-grade groups read books

centering on a common theme, such as survival, and discuss such things as the qualities needed to survive. The specific books dealing with a particular theme may differ for various students. Such grouping prevents the student who does much independent reading in advanced books from feeling isolated and rejected.

Fourth, gifted readers should be urged to read widely. For this, teachers need an extensive background in children's literature as well as cooperation from the school librarian. A useful resource for students from second grade through high school is the Junior Great Books Reading and Discussion Program.*

Fifth, these readers must learn to read critically. The use of Stauffer's (1975) Directed Reading Thinking Activity helps stress the thinking process view of reading. Having these students make judgments about the values espoused by the author, dissect the material on the basis of content and style, and discuss the appropriateness of the treatment of a topic, the believability of the plot and characters, and how different authors treat the same theme all strengthen the student's ability to read more critically.

Sixth, creative reading should be encouraged. Hilda Taba's discussion strategies (Trezise 1972) can be utilized. The teacher leads the students to infer how the characters feel, and why they feel that way. The student is also asked if anything similar ever

*Information may be obtained by writing to: The Great Books Foundation, 307 N. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL 60601.

happened to him or her, how he or she felt about it, why he or she felt that way, and what was done about it. Other ideas for creative reading can be found in Labuda's (1974) Creative Reading for Gifted Learners: A Design for Excellence.

Vocabulary development is also crucial to critical and creative reading. Because of the superior decoding and oral language skills of gifted readers, teachers frequently leave this area of development to chance. Their vocabularies can be enriched by studying connotations of words, figurative language, and etymology. The connotative power of words can be taught by discussing and listing groups of words that evoke certain images or feelings, such as mysterious or happy words. Poetry provides a rich source of words that elicit specific feelings. Advertising contains figurative language as well as "glad words" and "bad words". By thinking critically, students can evaluate the advertiser's creative use of language and the validity of the advertising claims. In delving into the history of words, these students are fascinated to learn that a word, such as "curfew," comes from a combination of two French words, "couvrir" (to cover) and "feu" (fire). "Couvre-feu" was the signal to bank the hearth fire for the night many centuries ago.

The use of analogies, as Bellows (1960) points out, not only increases vocabulary, but as "running shoes are to jogging (p. 507)," analogies are to critical and creative thinking and reading. It is

an especially suitable technique for older, bright students because it permits viewing concepts or vocabulary from original, novel, or unusual perspectives. As an added bonus, this imaginative thinking will prepare them for advanced aptitude tests.

Finally, various developmental skills must not be overlooked. Gifted readers may need help in increasing their reading rate and in learning reference skills. They must be shown when it is appropriate to skim and to scan and how to approach different types of reading assignments. When Arnold (1971) interviewed some gifted students in a San Diego high school, one of the problems they complained about was that they did not have enough time to get through all the reading material assigned in their honors courses and that they needed more help in locating information. Before they reach the secondary level, such skills can be taught to gifted readers on a periodic rather than daily basis and often through individual questions and conferences.

Conclusion

Effective instruction in reading for the gifted must be varied, interesting, and challenging. The child should be released from the "three-group mold" and from boring and meaningless drill. Merely assigning more and harder work is not enough, and allowing an advanced student to do what he or she wants when assignments are completed is not the answer. Differentiated instruction with

the emphasis on critical and creative reading, frequent opportunities for group discussions with others of like ability, and provisions for strengthening certain developmental skills are among the adjustments necessary for a successful reading program for the gifted.

Though they tend to be highly motivated to read, these students require specialized assistance to reach their full potential. They have the same basic needs as other students, but to a different degree and at different times. They particularly need to be encouraged to think critically. However, in looking after the needs of the gifted child, the teacher must not lose sight of the student's general development. This includes being accepted by the other children and interacting effectively with them. At times, the teacher's role is not only that of nurturer, but of protector as well.

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